

Carved in Stone

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Of all the inventions bequeathed to us by ancient Rome, the most widely used is surely the alphabet. This wonderfully versatile instrument was adapted from the Etruscan alphabet, which itself derives from the Greek. Though it adapted and developed over time, both in antiquity (Y and Z were introduced in the first century BC, for example) and later (W, J and U were added in the middle ages), the alphabet we use today is fundamentally the same as that used by Cicero and Virgil. It would be instantly recognisable to them.

It is not only the letters of the alphabet that link us with Rome, but also the calligraphic forms that those letters take. The letter-shapes we know did not develop instantly. The earliest Latin inscriptions, dating from the fifth century B.C., closely resemble archaic Greek writing, and may well look wholly foreign to readers of the modern alphabet. But by the time of Augustus and the early empire, the letters forms of monumental writing (or *scriptura monumentalis*) have evolved. The base of Trajan's column provides a superb example of these evenly proportioned, impressively bold shapes. From these Roman capitals (only capital letters are used on such inscriptions) descend the handwriting styles of the middle ages: 'uncial' script (rounded, handwritten), gothic, italic, versal, lombardic, Irish and others. These in turn lead us to the shapes designed by engravers for printed books. There have been many fine versions of, and variations on, the Roman letter forms, but *scriptura monumentalis* still thrives. Its combination of simple utility and elegant beauty makes it timelessly attractive. It is still the prototype for all monumental inscriptions; and indeed it appears in many other guises too, the youngest descendant being the computer font *Times New Roman*.

Letter shapes reflect the tools that create them, and the material on which they are imprinted. Roman capitals developed in the way they did as a result of a specific combination of factors, the stone-cutter's artful chisel and the hard surface of the stone. This is reflected in some of the other names by which they are known: 'lapidary (or 'stone') letters' (*litterae lapidariae*), and 'square letters' (*litterae quadratae*). (Though it is possible that *quadratae* or 'square' refers to the shape of the stone blocks on which they were cut, not the letters themselves.)

The inscription beginning *NIMBI IMMINEANT* provides a good example of the main features of this epigraphic style. It is worth savouring the inscription as a physical object for a moment before translating it. All the lines are exactly the same length, without any spaces seeming unduly compressed or expansive. The letters are immediately clear from a distance, yet they also have a dignity and elegance that holds the eye, and a restrained ornament in the small serifs (the strokes around the edges). They invite us to read slowly, with the steady rhythm suggested by the even spacing and the points separating the words within the lines. The deeply carved stems suggest depth and duration, and have a sculptural quality as they catch the passing light and shade. Everything seems expressive of clarity, calm, permanence.

But what are these lines? Let us attempt a rough translation. *NIMBI IMMINEANT*: 'let the rain-clouds hang over'. *NIL IPSE MOROR* is more bizarre: 'I myself do not delay at all'? In fact, *nihil morari* is an idiom, meaning 'to care nothing' or 'to set no value on', which provides a better sense: 'I myself do not care'. The rest is easy for anyone who knows Latin. *IN CORDE SOL FULGET*: 'The sun shines in my heart'. *ME ARCESSIT AMOR*: 'Love summons me'. So a rough rendering would run:

*Let the rain-clouds hang over me
but I don't care
for the sun shines in my heart
and Love calls me.*

A rather charming lyric, though a slightly odd one to find on a public monument. Perhaps a consolatory verse addressed to the mourner, in the voice of a spirit of the departed? Or a fragment of pastoral verse adorning a country house?

In fact, this fine, antique-looking inscription is a contemporary work by the master letter-cutter Gary Breeze. It is part of a series of four which were exhibited between March and May 2002 at the New Art Centre Sculpture Park at Roche Court, near Salisbury. The source of the text, as well as its maker, is contemporary. We can set aside any images the lines may conjure up of ancients contemplating the Elysian fields: this is a translation (by Colin Sydenham) of the immortal lines from *Singing in the Rain*:

*I'm laughing at the clouds
So dark up above
The sun's in my heart
And I'm ready for love.*

Not Horace musing on his Sabine farm, then, but Gene Kelly sloshing through the puddles. The interesting thing, though, is that these lines, simply by being in Latin and in the form of an inscription, do point our thoughts towards the ancient world. They illustrate how the physical presentation of a text affects the expectations we bring to it. Just the sight of *scriptura monumentalis* makes us anticipate something earnest and lofty. Learning the source comes as a surprise, a pleasant jolt, as this assumption is overturned. Breeze's inscriptions bring together things we are culturally trained to keep apart: ancient and modern, classic and popular, high seriousness and lowbrow popular entertainment. The permanence of inscription and antiquity is wedded to the unpretentious joy of a musical song. Ancient and modern, in these works, form a union in stone. The keynote is continuity. Just as the *scriptura* shows the continuation of a Roman invention, so the content suggests a link across time from Latin pastoral to the song lyrics of modern popular culture. Even more arrestingly, this is not yet another modern update of something classical, but rather the reverse: something modern is being taken back to the world of the ancient inscription, dressed in the robes of lapidary lettering, and lent the tautness and concision of the Latin language: prepositions recede, and the richly suggestive nouns (*NIMBI*, *SOL*, *AMOR*: 'rain-clouds', 'sun', 'love') become grandly prominent. Thus the familiar, clichéd sentiment takes on different, classical resonances through the act of translation. The ephemeral is converted into something lasting – which is exactly what the act of inscription does.

Latin inscriptions are not hard to find: they wait, unregarded most of the time, in churches, public buildings and sometimes older private houses. To the curious, they offer many pleasures: the satisfaction of translation, of course, but also a glimpse into the pride and humility of our ancestors, and a legacy from the craftsmen who use the same techniques as their ancient Roman forebears in turning letters into art. And as the inscriptions of Gary Breeze triumphantly prove, that art is living yet.

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The New Art Centre Sculpture Park and Gallery can be found at

Roche Court, East Winterslow, Wiltshire SP5 1BG; more information at www.sculpture.uk.com